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ABSTRACT

A study examined introductions used in competitive oral interpretation events. A total of 97 introductions (from four oral interpretation events at a nationally recognized Midwestern intercollegiate forensic tournament) were analyzed using four categories: Descriptive, Simple Theme, Descriptive and Simple Theme, and Argumentative Theme. Results showed that Descriptive and Simple Theme and Descriptive were by far the most commonly utilized introduction approaches, and the Argumentative Theme was the least frequently used. However, the argumentative introduction hones critical thinking and analytical skills, and broadens understanding of the human condition. Forensics educators, coaches, and judges should work together for the advancement of the argumentative perspective. (One table of data is included.) (SR)

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The Argumentative Introduction in Oral Interpretation

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Running Head: Introductions

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THE ARGUMENTATIVE INTRODUCTION IN ORAL INTERPRETATION

Guidelines and practices in competitive oral interpretation have changed throughout the years. Coaches and judges alike continually reevaluate the value of these activities for students both educationally and professionally. The most common focus establishes forensics as a co-curricular activity: to advance the student's knowledge in effective argumentation and to learn those skills which enhance the argumentative perspective. Jack Kay (1981) illustrates this best:

> . . . forensics educators should help equip students with methods/skills applicable to a variety of argumentation contexts. In addition to this "skills" goal, many forensics educators view forensics activities as a showcase of public argument . . . . (349).

This argumentative frame of reference for forensics is the cornerstone of this examination of introductions used in competitive oral interpretation events.

As early as 1967, scholars began talking about what should be included in the introduction for oral interpretation performances and what effect the introduction has on the audience. Brandes and Shepardson (1967) conducted a study in which they tested an "artistic"

introduction and a "narrative" introduction in terms of retention of the story selection by the audience. An artistic introduction was described as one which

> obeyed the laws of unity, coherence and emphasis and was aimed at giving subjects (audience) the conventional receptive "set" for listening (153).

The authors further describe what the artistic introduction is in relation to the poem utilized in the study (My Last Duchess, by Robert Browning). This type of introduction discusses the historical background of the poem and the literary form in which Browning wrote, however, the action of the poem is not discussed. The narrative introduction, on the other hand, is also designed to accomplish the objectives of unity, coherence, and emphasis, but further advocates acquainting "the subjects (audience) with the circumstances of the story to a degree which would enhance their understanding of the poem without removing the factor of suspense (153). Several characters are introduced and their personalities discussed. However, care is taken not to reveal any of the answers to the questions the subjects would later answer. These introductions seem to include some sort of rhetorical question designed to guide the reader through the selection. The study concluded that narrative introductory material proved more effective than

artistic introductory material for increasing audience retention.

This study clearly supports the argumentative perspective. The narrative introduction would include some type of argument of "justification" for using the selection, as well as pertinent information to relate the audience with the work to be performed. The reader of the piece would set forth an argument by guiding the audience toward some interpretation of the piece. Other authors have addressed this same issue and include the elements set forth by Brandes and Shepardson.

Verlinden (1987) establishes an argumentative perspective by urging a "metacritical model" for judging interpretation events. Verlinden states the role of the metacritic is to "evaluate the fit between the literature, performance, and the performer's critical judgements" (59). In order for this to happen, it is necessary for the interpretation to be viewed as an argument. In this light, Verlinden states the interpreter must make a claim in the introduction, and support that claim through the performance of the literature (59). In essence, the performer's critical judgements become the claims, and the arguments rest on how well these claims are supported by the interpretation. The argumentative perspective is utilized by requiring the performer to establish a claim in the

introduction. Agreement with this perspective is essential to an audience as it sets forth the goals of competitive forensics and acquaints the audience with the text and its interpretation.

Swarts (1988) takes the argumentative position further by establishing the specific functions of the oral interpretation introduction. Swarts states the introduction allows the interpreter the opportunity to

> establish vital descriptive data, but also to engage the audience in an active, dynamic thought encounter with the literature and the claims being advanced (39).

With these goals in mind, Swarts suggests three guideposts for the development of an introduction (39). First, the interpreter must provide and explanation of any information essential to the effective presentation of the literature, and to the audience comprehension of it. Second, a claim must be established that delineates the focus of the interpreter's analysis of the literature. The claim must also justify the selection of the literature to be performed. Finally, an interpreter should approach the development of the introduction creatively and thoughtfully which can lend to the establishment of the message and the mood.

This study was conducted to determine if students are using these standards in competitive oral interpretation performances. Data was collected at a nationally recognized Midwestern intercollegiate forensic tournament. Students were asked to write down their introductions to their interpretation selections. These introductions were then separated by event and analyzed.

Rather than use pre-set categories, this study allowed the categories to generate themselves from the data. This process provides a clearer picture of the content of oral interpretation introductions.

Method

The introductions used in this study were collected from students competing in oral interpretation events at a large Midwestern tournament during the fall of the 1990-1991 season. Introductions covered the oral interpretation events of the American Forensic Association National Individual Events Tournament (AFA-NIET) including oral interpretation of poetry, oral interpretation of prose, dramatic interpretation, and dramatic duo. Introductions written by our students were excluded from the study since they follow the style we argue for in this article and their inclusion may affect the generalizability of the results.

In order for comparisons to be made concerning the type of introductions, each introduction was determined to be one unit of analysis. Introductions were categorized as a whole entity as applicable to the presentation rather than as applicable to the literature. This was deemed necessary since some interpretations contained more than one piece of literary work (i.e., oral interpretation of poetry). Each introduction was also identified by its corresponding oral interpretation event.

The development of the categories in this study followed Berelson's (1952) definition of "what is said," specifically a subject-matter orientation. This study did not make use of any preset categorization system. Rather, a preliminary classification placed the comments into as many categories as necessary in accordance with the Berelson's (1952) perspective that categories are only limited by imagination. These categories were then collapsed resulting in a final taxonomy of four categories.

The four introduction categories, supported with examples from the study, are:

(1) Descriptive. An introduction was considered descriptive if the storyline, plot, situation, or characters were described.

"A little over 20 years ago, a French diplomat living in China fell in live with a Chinese opera singer who

unbeknownst to him was a man--for it was common for female Chinese opera roles to be played by a man. Over the course of their relationship, the diplomat passed classified information to this opera singer who was also an agent of the Chinese government. The diplomat was blinded by love, the opera singer was in search of his greatest acting challenge. A true story, a story of espionage and a betrayal, the story of M. Butterfly by Daniel Henry Hwang."

"Bertram Kyle is a writer plagued by that bane peculiar to his kind: writer's block. For months he has been unable to think of anything. Suddenly the ideas converge and a miracle happens. A life in the day of a writer by Tess Slesinger."

(2) Simple Theme. An introduction was considered simple theme if the basic premise of the story was addressed in a generic format.

"Sometimes it's not the big things in life that bring us to our knees, but rather the combination of these things with a myriad of daily annoyances in Myrna Lamb's I lost a pair of gloves yesterday, we see a woman experiencing this phenomenon."

"While it is true that rape has gained widespread attention in the tabloids and has been discussed at length in the journals it is still viewed by some as an act

of intimacy rather than violence. Rape fantasies by Margaret Atwood."

(3) Descriptive & Simple Theme. An introduction which combines the characteristics of both descriptive and simple theme introductions. This form of introduction may be identified by certain transitional phrases including "such is the case in . . . " and "this situation is exemplified by . . . ."

"Watching the deterioration of a loved one's mental health is one of the most difficult experiences for loved ones of the mentally ill. Such is the case in 'The House of Blue Leaves' by John Guare where Artie must make the difficult decision of whether or not to place is unstable wife Bananas into a hospital where she will be properly cared for. The house of blue leaves by John Guare."

"It is often said that we learn through discovery, and Mike is no exception. While visiting his grandmother in the Lawnrest nursing home, he learns that granting someone their wish can change one's own outlook on life."

"Letter-writing can be a catharsis, a purging of emotion. For this woman, it is her only outlet as her lover has just left her. Does she actually send the

letter? It doesn't really matter. Does she resolve her emotions for this man? Yes. After you've gone by Alice Adams."

(4) Argumentative Theme. An introduction was deemed argumentative when the basic premise of the story is presented in a thematic form which requires the literature to be perceived in a specific contextual frame.

"We all look to those who can bring clarity to our lives. Sometimes we go as far as designating people to this task, whether they have the answers or not. From the viewpoint of those select few who do listen, life becomes nothing more than a constant flow of complaints and fretting. It them becomes a challenge for them to overcome these thoughts of melancholy."

The introductions were coded independently by the two researchers using the four introduction categories detailed above. An initial agreement of 87.88 percent was achieved across all four individual events. Agreement per event was 81.48 percent for poetry interpretation, 85.71 percent in dramatic interpretation, 88.8 percent in dramatic duo, and 93.54 percent in prose interpretation. In order to better substantiate the level of agreement between the coders,

Cohen's Kappa was also computed. The results indicated an overall agreement of .86 with a high of .90 in prose and a low of .70 in poetry. According to Landis and Koch (1977), a Cohen's Kappa between .60 and .75 is "good" and more than .75 is "excellent." The high level of agreement between the two coders substantiates the efficacy of the coding scheme. After coding the introductions, the coders met and resolved disagreements to the satisfaction of both individuals.

Results

A total of 97 introductions were analyzed within the four oral interpretation events. As could be expected, prose produced the largest number of introductions at 31. Poetry interpretation followed in close second with 27 introductions. Dramatic interpretation and dramatic duo followed third and fourth, respectively, with 21 and 18 introductions.

In addressing the four oral interpretation events as a whole, Descriptive & Simple Theme and Descriptive were by far the most commonly utilized introduction approaches. As Table 1 illustrates, Descriptive & Simple Theme was the most common with 43 introductions while the Argumentative Theme approach was the least frequently used with only two introductions in this category.

Table 1

	Descriptive	Simple Theme	Descriptive & Simple Theme	Arg. Theme
Prose	10	7	13	1
Drama	11	3	7	0
Duo	13	0	5	0
Poetry	6	2	18	1
Total	40	12	43	2

Table 1 further illustrates that prose and poetry interpretation tend to rely on the Descriptive & Simple Theme approach while drama and dramatic duo tend to lean more toward the Descriptive introduction style. A chi-square analysis of the data supports the significance of these findings. Results across all four categories indicate a significant difference exists within the four approaches to introductions, χ^2 (3, n = 97) = 51.32, p < .001). Since our interest lies with Argumentative Themes, a chi-square was also computed for this category against Simple Theme (the next smallest type of introduction). Results indicate a significant difference exists between Simple Theme and Argumentative Theme, χ^2 (1, n = 14) = 7.14, p < .01).

This data clearly demonstrates that Descriptive and Descriptive & Simple Theme introductions are the most commonly employed types of introductions, while an

argumentative thematic approach in oral interpretation is rarely used in intercollegiate competitive individual events.

Discussion

These results clearly demonstrate that an argumentative theme, despite its obvious advantages, is a rarity in intercollegiate forensics. Students tend to rely on a description of the cutting because describing the story is far easier than attempting to determine the argumentative perspective the piece employs. McBath (1975), in his oft-cited passage on the rationale for forensics, stated:

> Oral interpretation of literature events are distinctive because they focus on the human perspective from a poetic stance. . . . with the purpose of enriching the audience's understanding of the human condition (p. 11).

The application of an argumentative introductions in oral interpretation is one significant step toward integrating an understanding of the "human condition" in oral interpretation. The argumentative introduction provides the criteria the audience may use to determine the significance of the selection. The judge may also use these same criteria provided in the introduction as a key component in the rank/rate decisions in the round.

What is required is a demand for an argumentative perspective in oral interpretation. This may achieved through efforts on two fronts. First, individual coaches need to start requiring their competitors utilize an argumentative introduction in the interpretations. Second, and more importantly, judges need to begin writing ballots which cite the need for a competitor to use argumentative introductions. When judges start questioning the efficacy of a Descriptive, Simple Theme, or Descriptive & Simple Theme introductions, and encourage the use of argumentative introductions, the competitors (and coaches) will listen. This requires a reversal in current judging comments. Mills (in press) recently demonstrated that judges' remarks on introductions compose only 4.4 percent of all ballot comments. The forensic community needs to remember the words of Thonssen, Baird, and Braden (1948/1970) in Speech Criticism: "Practice, theory, and criticism are, in the broadest sense, indivisible elements of an art. Each influences the other, with the result that all are modified by the circular action" (p. 18).

We offer the both theoretical reinforcement and critical inquiry into the application of the argumentative perspective in introductions; the forensic community must now provide constructive criticism to competitors on their introductions in order to alter the current trend of

Descriptive, Simple theme, and Descriptive & Simple Theme predominant in oral interpretation events towards the Argumentative Theme.

Conclusion

Argumentative introductions, obviously, are not utilized by oral interpreters. In light of this finding, it is essential forensic educators and critics work together for the advancement of the argumentative perspective. By doing so, interpretive events will become easier to judge, and will also require students to employ sound reasoning skills in preparing their events. Obviously, this perspective will provide a broader educational basis for forensics and will enhance student's professional abilities. The formulation of the argumentative introduction allows interpreters of literature to hone critical thinking skills, analytical skills, and broaden their understanding of the human condition, all of which are the goals of forensic educators nationwide.

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